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## Blaenau Gwent REACH Summary Report

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## BLAENAU GWENT RESIDENTS ENGAGING IN ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE (2019-2021)

A collaboration between the Open University (OU) in Wales, Linc Cymru Housing Association and Aberbeeg Community Group. Funded by UKRI.

### OVERVIEW

WRITTEN BY DR RICHARD MARSDEN, JULY 2021

BG REACH was a creative arts project supporting the people of Blaenau Gwent to make art, music, creative writing and film that reflects on the rich and fascinating history of their local area. The work that they have created through the project is a celebration of Blaenau Gwent's heritage expressed through the talents of the people who live there.

The project was funded by a £38,000 grant from UKRI's 2019 'enhancing place-based partnerships in public engagement' call. Originally slated to last 6 months, it actually ran for 17 months due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Blaenau Gwent was chosen for this project because almost 50 percent of the county falls within the bottom two quintiles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. The region around Aberbeeg was selected because Linc Cymru had good links with residents there and, most importantly, the area already had strong structures to support community action in the form of Aberbeeg Community Group.

BG REACH worked with sixty-three participants who between them produced sixty-six individual creative reflections on the history, heritage and lived experience of Blaenau Gwent, ranging from poems to paintings, films to collages, reminiscences to stories to songs. They have been curated and made publicly available for free in the [BG REACH Online exhibition](#).



MODRON, WARRIOR QUEEN  
(BARBARA CANDLISH)

### WHAT WE DID

Co-design and co-production were central to the BG REACH ethos. The project began design meetings between OU and Linc staff and members of Aberbeeg Community Group. The aim was to establish what the community wanted from the project and then work out how to collaboratively deliver it. From there, three launch events were held to generate interest and engagement.

### THE AIMS OF THE PROJECT WERE THREEFOLD:

- 1** To empower members of marginalised communities with the means to use the creative arts to acquire skills, pursue further learning opportunities, and combat place-based stigma.
- 2** To develop capacity and expertise in community-led co-design and co-production, laying the groundwork for future collaborations.
- 3** To use participants' creative reflections on the heritage of Blaenau Gwent to shed light on the connections between history and identity in one of Wales' most disadvantaged post-industrial regions.

The project consisted of two strands. The first centred on a series of public workshops held in Aberbeeg, facilitated by OU tutors and local freelance experts. Participants were supported to reflect on the heritage of Blaenau Gwent and their experiences of living there, through creative writing, music, oral history and visual art. These sessions enabled community members to learn new skills, build new relationships and produce creative outputs.

The second strand involved supporting secondary school pupils from Ebbw Fawr Learning Community to interview elderly residents at Llys Glyncoed extra care scheme about their lives in Blaenau Gwent, and then create digital stories of those reminiscences. The aim was to foster intergenerational links and knowledge-sharing whilst equipping the pupils involved with new skills and a stronger connection to where they lived.

Seventeen workshops were delivered out of a scheduled twenty-four before the COVID-19 lockdown began in late March 2020. However, BG REACH continued remotely. Fourteen workshops were run online, forty-two art packs were delivered to community members and their families, and one-to-one contact with participants was maintained via email, Zoom and small socially distanced gatherings outside. A remote launch event to herald the release of the [BG REACH Online Exhibition](#) was held in July 2021.



BG REACH LAUNCH EVENT, JANUARY 2019

At the outset of the project, many participants felt intimidated by the involvement of a university. One said:

*'I was so nervous, I thought It would be too hard for me and I wouldn't be able to get involved!'*

Another said:

*'People were scared that they would be shown up in front of everyone, like being at school and that's what put us all off'.*

Another said:

*'I loved it, it opened my eyes to life around me and made me want to learn again'.*

A similar story can be seen in the intergenerational strand. One Llys Glyncoed resident said of the school pupils who would be interviewing her:

*'I didn't think they would want to hear what we had to say'.*

Later, however, that same participant felt very differently:

*'I love seeing the young people joining in, they were great fun and we all enjoyed it'.*

One of the pupils, meanwhile, said,

*'I loved listening to music with the elders and it was even more enjoyable to dance with them'.*

***"I loved it, it opened my eyes to life around me and made me want to learn again." - Attendee***

Trepidation levels among potential participants were clearly high before the project began. But this was overcome by the championing of the project by Aberbeeg Community Group, through the pre-existing relationships that Linc had with the community, and via the OU's experience of working with adults from a diverse range of backgrounds.

A short film summarising the aims, activities and outputs of the project can be found in the ['About this project'](#) section of the BG REACH Online Exhibition.

## IMPACT AND BENEFITS

The [BG REACH Online Exhibition](#) serves as a riposte to the post-industrial stigma of economic decline often associated with Blaenau Gwent. It highlights the community spirit and creative skills of the people living in the area. It also acts as a rumination on the region's history, not just during the age of industry but before and since as well. It is the culmination of the project and a celebration of all that has been achieved.

The project produced broader benefits too. OU staff learned a great deal about ways to overcome anxiety over the 'university' label in communities that have low rates of participation in HE.

Colleagues in Linc. meanwhile, gained experience of acting as a bridge between local communities and larger organisations operating on a national scale.

As a member of Aberbeeg Community Group put it: *'I think it worked so well with all three partners, because everyone got on, all the partners had different strengths, us knowing our community, the Open University brought in the tutors and Linc helped to pull everyone together. It has been wonderful'.*

Most importantly, project participants have benefitted.

**One said that the project was about:**

***'Meeting new people, learning about our area and improving my confidence by making me realise I'm not too old to learn'.***

Another attendee reported that:

*'Some people who came along were really self-conscious and one young lady who was seventeen hadn't been to school for four years. At the end of the workshops, she had written a little story and recited it! She has autism and this was an amazing achievement. She is now hoping to attend college'.*

As a result of the intergenerational activities at Llys Glyncoed, meanwhile, some of the participating school pupils have continued their involvement with the residents.

One said:

*'I loved it so much at Llys Glyncoed me and my friend are going to volunteer after school.'*

The acquisition of new skills and the reactivation of old ones was also a key outcome.

As one participant put it:

*'Who would have thought that we could all become students as such again? There is loads to learn and lots of us who want to.'*



TILE FROM THE BG REACH COLLAGE  
(VALERIE ASHDOWN)



TILE FROM THE BG REACH COLLAGE  
(BARRY SIMKISS)

In that vein, IT skills sessions for local community members are planned for autumn 2021. They will be run by Aneurin Leisure Trust, a charity that delivers cultural services across Blaenau Gwent, and supported by OU staff introducing OU materials and study options as opportunities for further learning.

Furthermore, as a direct result of involvement in BG REACH, Aberbeeg Community Group have installed WiFi in the community centre where workshops were held. The BG REACH team have added a PC and monitor from project funds. The group also gained valuable experience of community development in partnership with external organisations and have subsequently been successful in accessing other funding pots.



## FINDINGS

Aligned with the aims laid out on page 1, key project findings were as follows:

1

Using the creative arts as a means of reflecting on the past is an effective means of promoting place-based community cohesion and confidence in the face of stigma, and of equipping participants who have been away from education for a long time with the self-assurance needed to take advantage of other learning opportunities.

2

The involvement of appropriate organisations and groups is pivotal the success of community development projects. BG REACH relied heavily on the strong relationship that Linc had with its tenants, on OU expertise in working with adult learners, and on the leadership and commitment of Aberbeeg Community Group.

3

The industrial past is a significant factor in how people living in Blaenau Gwent perceive themselves. However, equally powerful are calls to deeper medieval or Celtic ideas of history, as well as a view of de-industrialisation that focuses on the return of natural beauty, green spaces and prosperity rather than the effects of economic decline.

## PROJECT TEAM

BG Reach was led by Sarah Roberts and Richard Marsden for the Open University in Wales, Suzy Bowers for Linc Cymru, and Pat Tovey for Aberbeeg Community Group.

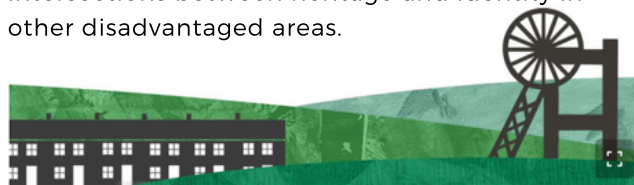
A full list of personnel and acknowledgements can be found in the '[About this project](#)' section of the online exhibition:

## NEXT STEPS

At the time of writing, a physical version of the exhibition is being planned. This will be launched at St Fagans National Museum of History in spring 2022 with elements 'popping up' at community venues in the Gwent Valleys.

An academic article is also being written, looking at what the creative work produced by participants can reveal about the intersections between heritage, memory and identity in post-industrial South Wales.

Finally, the team is pursuing opportunities for further funding to undertake similar work in other parts of Wales – a Wales REACH project. This will enable us to apply what we have learned from BG REACH to empower other communities, widen access to learning opportunities whilst at the same time taking a comparative approach to the intersections between heritage and identity in other disadvantaged areas.



## KEY STATISTICS

- **44** workshops or events
- **29** face-to-face workshops or events pre COVID-19
- **15** online workshops or events during COVID-19
- **63** unique participants at workshops
- **123** attendees at **3 launch events** and **1 online sharing**
- **42** art packs delivered
- **66** individual creative outputs
- Participants ranged from **2 to 96** years old

## CONTACT US

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